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For the 1041st cleaning the Big Easy was anything but

By Sgt. Floyd Whiting
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NEW ORLEANS – Walking out of a Saint Anthony's classroom on a recent October day, Soldiers of the Wyoming Army National Guard's 1041st Engineer Company removed their respirators to take a breath of New Orleans air, wiping the fatigue and sweat from their eyes.

The 1041st Engineer Company was deployed to New Orleans to take part in the clean up of the city after both Hurricane Katrina and Rita had torn through the city leaving a wake of destruction.

After two days spent in Alexandria, La., the unit received word they would be going to New Orleans.

"When I first heard we were coming to Louisiana my first thought was 'It's about time we get to go help.' When I heard we were coming to New Orleans, it didn't faze me because I came to help without knowing where, what the conditions were, or what our mission was. We were just here to help," said Sgt. Joe Buckholz the unit's administrator.

One of the first missions assigned to the 1041st was the construction of 10 weapons clearing barrels to be used by security patrols. The barrels were distributed for security use at

the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center where the 1041st was based and the De La Salle High School which Task Force Big Sky, the task force in charge of the National Guard effort, used for its headquarters.

The 1041st was then tasked with cleaning and repairing the school. The Soldiers worked as a team to accomplish the mission and in only three days they helped put the school back into working order and ready for classes to continue.

“De La Salle High School is the only high school conducting classes in New Orleans, and it couldn’t have happened without the hard work from the 1041st Engineer Company,” said Capt. Nona Nissen, 1041st commander.

The 1041st was then tasked with the clean up of the Saint Anthony’s Cathedral and School. This would be a task that would prove the tenacity and motivation of the entire unit. The company would have to clean rotting food over three weeks old from large fridges and remove still-standing stagnant water containing everything from typical mud to raw sewage and a deadly form of fungus known as black mold.

Within the Saint Anthony’s classrooms the walls were covered with black mold, a fungus that can cause respiratory problems should the spores be inhaled. The 1041st command had taken every possible precaution to maintain the health of the troops.

“With protective clothing and respiratory equipment, the progress was painstaking and slow going, but necessary. Soldiers had to be changed out and decontaminated every 30 minutes. With an average (outside the suit) temperature of 85 degrees, the Soldiers appeared as if they had just came out of the shower when coming out of the equipment,” said 1st Sgt. Bill Jeffers.

The troops entering the school wore wear protective suits, boots, biological protective masks, and two layers of protective gloves. Working within the heat of the suits proved to be a daunting task for the Soldiers.

Upon exiting the school the Soldiers underwent a thorough decontamination process involving stations that had been set up to clean them from head to toe. Spc. Scott Turner, a member of the 1041st’s 2nd Platoon, was tasked with pouring water into the mouths of the

troops as they had their masks removed. The Soldiers were not allowed to handle the water themselves to avoid contamination.

“They looked as if they had done three physical fitness tests in a row. They looked beat, after only 30 minutes in the classroom the sweat flowed off of them,” Spc. Turner said.

Although the task was draining on the troops the end result of all the work was more than rewarding.

“The Soldiers did a lot of hard work but, as local residents have continually pointed out, the school looks much better than it has in a long time, even before the hurricanes,” said 2nd Lt. Winston Crandall, the unit’s executive officer.

The 1041st also took part in “Clean up Magazine,” a one-day event that allowed the Soldiers to clean Magazine Street side by side with the citizen volunteers of New Orleans.

“I worked with some very long-time residents who told us about how the city was 40 years ago. Their enthusiasm prompted my motivation to get Magazine Street up and running again.” said Sgt. Deah Dickerson.

The 1041st provided 85 Soldiers to the clean up and, according to Nissen, “were the spine of it.”

During its deployment, the 1041st would assess a total of 37 schools and clean 22 of them. The company also cleaned seven churches including one of which had experienced eight feet of flood water.

When the Wyoming Air National Guard C-130 cargo planes came to take them back to Wyoming, on Tuesday, Oct. 25, the 1041st had spent 26 days in Louisiana working, sweating, cleaning, and rebuilding the city of New Orleans and were looking forward to going home to be with their families and friends.

“We came down to make a difference,” Nissen said, “and I think we did.”